

# Silent, Deadly, and It Runs in C

*By Capt. Joe Cleary*

A platoon was two weeks away from getting underway for their six-month deployment. The MEU's communication platoon had all their equipment aboard the ship—the tough work was done. With little to do but relax, the platoon decided to work on their patrolling skills.

All they needed were their “black cadillacs” (boots), weapon, 782 gear, and two radios. They kept the plan simple and decided to do the patrols in their backyard, the Santa Margarita River Basin, which was less than a mile away from their shop in Camp Del Mar. The radio chief, who was a staff sergeant, divided the 15 Marines into three teams and designated one team as the aggressors.

Before departing for the field, the staff sergeant briefed the platoon, “Safety is paramount. Don't lose your weapons, and keep them out of the water. If anyone gets injured, notify someone immediately.” Two of the three teams climbed into a HMMWV and drove to the training area, while the aggressor team hiked.

Each team was dropped off in different locations so they could converge and ambush each other. On one occasion, the staff sergeant, who was leading one of the teams, saw a passenger train zip over the trestle that crossed the Santa Margarita River. Startled by its speed, the staff sergeant yelled to a nearby Marine, “Stay away from the tracks. It's (train) going too damn fast.” Several ambushes later, the platoon returned to the shop for chow.

Before going back to the field for an afternoon of more patrolling and ambushing, the staff sergeant reminded the platoon members to stay away from the tracks. “It's difficult to hear the train because it's almost

silent,” he said. The platoon drove out in the HMMWV, but the staff sergeant stayed behind for a meeting.

One of the teams, led by a sergeant, decided to position themselves at the trestle. They planned to ambush the aggressors as they approached from the west along a dirt road, which paralleled the riverbank. Four Marines, who were part of the ambushing team, situated themselves several feet from where the tracks entered the trestle (on its northeast side). From this position, they could overlook the road.

As the aggressors approached, a corporal crossed the tracks to the west side to get a better look. When he did, a train suddenly appeared from the north. The train's engineer saw him and immediately reacted by sounding the horn and throwing the train into an emergency stop. Another Marine on the trestle saw the train and dove for the trestle's walkway. He balled himself up while the train sucked up his pack. Meanwhile, the corporal tried to dart back to his position, but it was too late. The train hit and killed him. It took three-quarters of a mile for the engineer to stop the train.

Not only did base range regulations prohibit units from training on the railroad tracks, there were signs posted at the trestle warning people to stay off the tracks. In this case, the tracks lay between the north and southbound lanes of Interstate 5. Because of the noise coming from the busy highway and their intense focus on the ambush, the Marines had no idea that a passenger train was approaching their position at 90 mph.

It's no secret that when Marines train, their adrenaline surges. We get caught up in the excitement of the task, which is expected and many times necessary.

# Our Backyard



The background photo was taken from the north side of the trestle just after the mishap occurred. Seconds before the mishap, the victim positioned himself just before the trestle, where a Marine is walking.

And, that's also why we need to use range-safety officers or controllers, people not directly involved in the training, to reign us in when we begin to take unnecessary risks. Simple and off-the-cuff training can increase in danger if it's not controlled. 🌟

*These Marines were not the only ones who disregarded orders and the danger signs. When I was stationed in Camp Del Mar, it was common*

*practice for Marines to cross over the trestle during PT. It was the alternate route used to reach the tomato fields when the river was at flood tide; I know this because I was one of them. But my idea of crossing the trestle changed when the corporal was killed—I vividly remember that day. The corporal was to be meritoriously promoted in the field, that afternoon.—Ed.*

Because of the noise coming from the busy highway and their intense focus on the ambush, the Marines had no idea that a passenger train was approaching their position at 90 mph.

Photograph by Sr. Airman Rick Bloom



A squad is an easy target for a passing train.